

Lessons from Hazard  
Matthew 9:14-17  
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Kory Wilcoxson

I wasn't planning on preaching about the mission trip today. I figured we would be a week removed from the experience, and with our Power Lab VBS this past week, I thought my mind would have moved onto other things, like test tubes and Bunsen burners. I already had a different verse picked out for this morning.

But that will have to wait, because what I saw last week has stuck with me in ways I didn't expect, and I believe there are some lessons there for us as God's people and as a congregation. Who would have thunk that a small, dying church in the foothills of eastern Kentucky would have something to teach to a thriving congregation in the north shore of Chicago? Hazard was full of surprises.

I have to admit I was a bit hesitant going to Hazard. Growing up in Louisville, the most metropolitan city in Kentucky, which is a little bit like being the fastest turtle, you hear rumors about those small eastern Kentucky coalmining towns and the people who live there. Some of those fears were affirmed when we stayed our first night in my home church across the river from Louisville. When I told one of the members there we were going to Hazard for our mission trip, he started humming the music to "Deliverance." Another youth, who had been to Hazard on a mission trip, said, "Don't go out at night and stay together." Even my own father, who is usually pretty nonchalant, was taken aback. When I told him we were going to Hazard to do mission work, he said, "Why would you want to go there?"

For me, this is a lesson in perception versus reality. The people we met in Hazard could not have been more hospitable. It wasn't just a polite head nod; it was the biblical kind of hospitality, genuine and welcoming and overflowing. The writer of the book of Hebrews says, "Do not forget to welcome strangers, because by so doing some people have welcomed angels without knowing it." I'm not sure I would go so far as to call our group of 18 people "angels," but were sure treated that way.

And not only by the people whom we were helping. On Thursday night, we were looking for something to do, and we learned that in Hazard, your options are pretty limited. We found a little place with miniature golf and laser tag, so we gave it a try. I was the first to walk in, and was greeted with the most enthusiastic "Howdy!" I've ever heard.

The lady's name was Nicole, and she was working by herself that night. When we arrived there were only two other people in the place. I informed Nicole she was about to be swamped with 18 people. She smiled really big and said, "That's great!" She welcomed all of us, went over all the things we could do, and then spent the night running upstairs to staff the laser tag and then downstairs to staff the cash register. I later found out she has five kids, which might explain why 18 people showing up didn't faze her.

Nicole was a great example of Hazard hospitality, as were Ivan and Sarah Jean and Joe and Dana and Norma and Doug and Mrs. Grier, who told me she was "four score and three years old" like everyone gave their age that way. In our lives we often rely on other people's opinions to tell us what to buy or what to read or who to vote for or how to

treat someone. There are some people out there who will try to tell you that the Bible is boring or that certain groups of people aren't important or that people in eastern Kentucky are unfriendly. I now know that it's much better to see for myself than to rely on the opinions of others, especially when those opinions seek to devalue people. That's why God gave each of us brains of our own.

Another lesson I bring back really hit home with me as a pastor. Hazard Christian Church was a beautiful place. The sanctuary, built in 1925, is majestic and filled with all the original stained glass, and includes a balcony and a baptistery. In total, the building has three floors plus a basement. One of the locals asked me where we were working. When I told him, he said, "Oh yeah, I know that church. There used to be nothing like it in all of Perry County." I'm sure in its heyday Hazard Christian Church was the place to be.

But not anymore. This once-thriving church has fallen on some serious hard times and is in danger of becoming extinct. I don't know how it got that way. I was afraid to ask the church members, who seemed both too proud and too wounded to want to talk about it. Maybe there was a conflict or a split. Maybe people flocked to the newer churches down the hill. Maybe the congregation just got older and started dying off. What's left is but a small remnant of what used to be and a building the congregation can no longer keep up with.

I don't know how that congregation got to this point, so I'm not longer talking about them. But it is important to note that churches need to pay attention to what's going on around them, and not lose sight of what they are called to be. In the book of Revelation, Jesus gave a message to seven different churches, including the church in Ephesus. This once-small church had grown into a significant congregation doing good deeds and living out the gospel. But Jesus criticized them, saying, "I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen!" Too many churches have fallen from great heights because they lost sight of why they existed in the first place.

It goes back to the story of Abraham, which I preached about a few weeks ago. Abraham was called by God to go to an unknown place, and Abraham went. I believe God is calling churches to move forward, to march on, to explore new areas of faith and spirituality and living out the gospel. But for some churches and some people, it's easier just to stay put, especially when things are going well. When a church is doing well and growing, it's easy to sit back and just let people flock through your doors. Until you realize, of course, that the people have stopped coming, and all that's left are those faithful few, trying to keep the doors open.

The bottom line is that the life of faith is a life of movement and change. God never called anyone in the Bible to stay put and maintain the status quo. The world around us doesn't stop, so neither should we. As Christians, we are called to continue to move forward on our faith journey, always seeking to find the next step along the path. Reading scripture, praying, worshipping, serving – these are the steps along the journey.

Every church is susceptible to what happened at Hazard Christian, including ours. It would be very easy for us to just sit back and let the world move on around us. But the gospel will not be shared if none of us share it. To use Jesus' analogy, if we let our wineskins get old, we won't be able to receive all the new things God is doing around us. The Bible is clear that our God is a God of the new. In Isaiah, God says, "See, I am doing

a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" We will perceive the new things God is doing in our midst if we have the eyes to see it.

I guess the mission trip struck a chord with me because as a church, we are about to do some new things. We have a new constitution taking effect in a few days that's quite different from the old one, and we're completely changing our staffing situation because of Tim's leaving. And for me, both of those things are scary. Change is scary. I think I know how everything will work out, but I don't know for sure.

What I do know is that, as individuals and as a church, we are not called to stay the same. I would rather take two steps forward and one step back than take no steps at all. We may think that we're too old or too busy or we don't know the Bible well enough or we're not spiritual enough. But God comes to us where we are and works with us as we are to move us forward. I believe God worked through our group to help Hazard Christian Church right where they were. I had an email this morning that said because of our work, the church is considering holding their first Homecoming Sunday in years. We're not all called to be 100 miles down the road of faith. We're simply called to be one step further than we were.

The last lesson I brought back is one I hope you already know. I really enjoyed talking with Ivan and Sarah Jean Woods and Joe Goodlette, all members of Hazard Christian. They are all salt-of-the-earth people. Ivan and Sarah Jean had us over to their house on Friday for fried chicken and fellowship. Ivan poured us some of his homemade sassafras tea and gave us a tour of his garden with rhubarb and sugar snap peas and blueberries. Joe gave us all certificates honoring us as Dukes and Duchesses of Hazard. These are good people.

It hurt me to see how much they grieved their church. At various times during our trip, each one of them expressed to me their shame or embarrassment over what's happened to their church building. I wanted to say to them, "This church isn't the church! You are the church." If our sanctuary and church buildings burnt down or blew up or crumbled or deteriorated, would we stop being the church?

Just as our bodies are not the essence of who we are, our buildings aren't the essence of who the church is. Ivan and Sarah Jean and Joe are the church. You are the church. I am the church. And we are called to live lives that take what we learn here in this place out into the world, so that the church is not a geographical location but an attitude, a way of life, a perspective which guides what we say and do.

I learned a lot in Hazard. I learned how to put down tile in a bathroom, though not perfectly. I learned that raw rhubarb is really, really tart. And I learned that God is there, in Hazard. Of all places. And now, after that experience, I learned the only way to go is forward.